J. Fac. Cul. Edu. Saga Univ.
Vol. 6, No.1 (2001) 289~295

Shegog's Easter Sermon in *The Sound and the Fury*

Hironori HAYASE

Introduction

William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* is pervaded by nihilism, echoing the world of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, literally "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." In an antithesis to the nihilistic atmosphere the novel creates, however, Faulkner tries to insert hope or salvation in the story through the Easter sermon we can hear together with Dilsey and Benjy in the fourth section of the novel, as Stephen Ross also comments: "However despairing or 'nihilistic' we may find the novel, the momentary ameliorative affirmation engendered by the Easter sermon must be acknowledged"("Powerful Voice" 8)[1].

Truly, Dilsey, as many critics have observed, embodies endurance and humanity as a counterpoint to the other hopeless characters, but it should be noted that Dilsey is given a kind of "epiphany" and spiritual support by this Easter sermon[2]. Dilsey is so deeply moved by the Reverend Shegog's sermon that she cannot stop crying:

> Dilsey made no sound, her face did not quiver as the tears took their sunken and devious courses, walking with her head up, making no effort to dry them away even.
> "Whyn't you quit dat, mammy?" Frony said.
> "Wid all dese people lookin. We be passin white folks soon."
> "I've seed de first en de last," Dilsey said. "Never you mind me."
> "First en last whut?" Frony said.
> "Never you mind," Dilsey said. "I seed de beginnin, en now I sees de endin."(371)

Dilsey here seems to have certainty or assuredness, which is evoked by Shegog's Easter Sermon. What kinds of elements of the sermon move Dilsey so much? The aim in this paper is to give a close analysis of Shegog's sermon in terms of its theme, style and technique and, in consequence, to interpret the message Faulkner attempts to give through the sermon.

Ⅰ. Theme

Many critics have given a high admiration to the Easter sermon made by the Reverend Shegog, a visiting preacher from St. Louis, in a small "weathered" church(364). "Shegog's Easter sermon," declares André Bleikasten, for example, "may be called a triumph of Faulkner's verbal virtuosity"(141) and "the eloquence of the spoken word"(140). Stephen Ross, who regards the sermon as "one of Faulkner's most sustained examples of black speech fully rendered and

maintained in dialect writing"(*Inexhaustible Voice* 42), admires "Nowhere in Faulkner's oeuvre is the presence and power of voice more beautifully conceived"(36) than in this sermon[3].

Mainly based on Revelation and St. Luke, the Reverend Shegog preaches about Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. He recurrently proclaims that he has a bitter memory of Jesus crucified: " 'I got de ricklickshun en de blood of de Lamb'"(368).

Shegog furthermore explains that it is because people let Jesus be victimized without doing anything that God turned away His face and shut His door: "de Lawd did turn His mighty face," or "de turnt-away face of God," or "I can see de widowed God shet His do"(370). Unless those obligations on human beings' part are fulfilled, warns Shegog, God will not provide humanity with any salvation and His Word: "I hears de weepin en de lamentation of de po mammy widout de salvation en de word of God!"(369)

Through the most sacred Christian episode of Jesus, the Reverend Shegog lays emphasis on the necessity of love or self-sacrifice and acknowledgement of our obligations. These are the very factors the Compsons are lacking and make a remarkable antithesis to the loveless Compsons. The Compson people we see in the previous sections are all self-centered, struggling in their own inner world, with no room for others. Benjy is an idiot and cannot communicate with others and is immersed in the past nostalgic world in which the loving Caddy used to be. Quentin, equally closed-minded, regards his suffering as the most serious and deadly on earth, escaping the "loud" world, and chooses narcissitically to commit suicide. Jason is selfish and judges everything, including even his brother and sister, in terms of money, as a greedy merchant does. Mr. Compson, nihilistic and sarcastic, is suffering so much from his own sense of loss that he cannot love their children. Mrs. Compson, much worse, has such high pride that she cannot provide motherly love for her children. They are too selfish and egoistic to have any room for love. No sacrifice or obligation can be found in the Compson family. Dilsey is the only person that can exemplify love in the loveless Compsons and serves them selflessly till the end. Thadious Davis also observes that Shegog's sermon is far from the Compson's world:

> Because the Reverend Shegog and his black congregation are so far removed from the white world, there is no possibility that their experience of resurrection and life can have meaning and value for Jason, Quentin, or Mrs. Compson.(110)

The theme of the sermon is in a sharp antithesis to the loveless world the Compson family shows and matches the factors Dilsey assumes. It is certain that this sermon gives courage and hope to Dilsey, who is suffering as she sees the Compson family deteriorate.

Ⅱ. Speech Technique

The theme is not the only factor that so deeply moves Dilsey and other members of the congregation. Besides its theme, we should notice, the Reverend Shegog's speech owes its magnificent success more largely to his narrative art. It is this technique that keeps the very familiar story about Jesus from falling into an unsubstantial flow of words, and instead infuses life into each word, the power of which enhances the congregation up to experience the true religious joy. In sharp contrast to Quentin's unproductive, narcissistic word-play, Shegog's word

has its entity and soul. What kind of narrative art enables Shegog to give life to his word? In order to solve this question, it will be useful to discuss it in special comparison with the Reverend Dimmesdale's narrative technique in *The Scarlet Letter*, because there are remarkable similarities in narrative technique between the two ministers.

1. Native language

Dimmesdale has the power of speech other ministers lack:

> All that they lacked was the gift that descended upon the chosen disciples, at Pentecost, in tongues of flame; symbolizing, it would seem, not the power of speech in foreign and unknown languages, but that of addressing the whole human brotherhood in the heart's native language. These fathers, otherwise so apostolic, lacked Heaven's last and rarest attestation of their office, the Tongue of Flame. They would have vainly sought - had they ever dreamed of seeking - to express the highest truths through the humblest medium of familiar words and images.(97-98)

Dimmesdale, through suffering a great deal from remorse of conscience, is endowed with the "tongue of flame," the gift "which, by the Holy Spirit enables the apostles' words to be understood by any hearer in his/her own language"(Acts 2:1-14)[4]. It is a gift endowed only through remorseful suffering, and in the case of Dimmesdale, "this very burden" gives him "sad, persuasive eloquence," as the following explains:

> But this very burden it was, that gave him sympathies so intimate with the sinful brotherhood of mankind; so that his heart vibrated in unison with theirs, and received their pain into itself, and sent its own throb of pain through a thousand other hearts, in gushes of sad, persuasive eloquence. (98)

Through tremendous suffering, Dimmesdale can acquire the power of addressing his congregation in the "heart's native language"(98),[5] and of "experiencing and communicating emotion"(97). Thus Dimmesdale succeeds in empathizing with his audience, as John Bayer observes: "He is all the more unique because his burden of sin has paradoxically enhanced his ability to empathize with his parishioners.... A positive sympathy is generated by the bond of sin, and Dimmesdale's affinity with his flock is compounded by a strange blend of saintly breath and wretched flesh"(260).

Likewise, Shegog, despite his "wizened black face like a small, aged monkey"(365), gives the congregation an image of the tortured Jesus: "his whole attitude that of a serene, tortured crucifix that transcended its shabbiness and insignificance"(368). Besides, he is so veteran a preacher as to switch his language into "Negroid" accent, the language most common both to the speaker and the hearers - it is so common that the congregation "did not mark just when his intonation, his pronunciation, became negroid"(368). The success of his sermon is greatly attributed to the use of the common, native language, which enables his voice directly to "sink into their hearts"(367). Faulkner attempts to visualize the Negroid accents on the level of the text's discourse by the visual dialect spelling, such as "breddren en sistuhn," "ricklickshun." For this effectiveness of Negroid dialect, Faulkner is indebted to Mark Twain's use of Jim's black

accents. Comparing Huck's white English, Jim's black language is so primitive and powerful as to speak to Huck's heart, as the following example shows:

> "What do dey stan' for? I's gwyne to tell you. When I got all wore out wid work, en wid de callin'for you, en went to sleep, my heart wuz mos' broke bekase you wuz los', en I didn' k'yer no mo' what become er me de raf'. En whet I wake up en fine you back agin, all safe en soun', de tears come en I could a got down on my knees en kiss' yo' foot I's so thankful. En all you wuz thinkin 'bout wuz how you could make a fool uv ole Jim wid a lie. Dat truck dah is *trash*; en trash is what people is dat puts dirt on de head er dey fren's en makes 'em ashamed."(105)

Thus, his Negroid accent annihilated the initial distance between a strange, powerless-looking preacher from St. Louis and the congregation.

2. Mental Pictures

Another technique Shegog has to give life to his word is similar to Dimmesdale's ability to experience and communicate his emotion: Shegog has the power of transmitting his mental pictures to the congregation. He talks to the congregation about his mental pictures as vividly as if he was in the biblically significant scenes, watching and hearing. He proclaims, for example, he watches Jesus crucified at Golgotha and hears women crying: "I sees Calvary, wid de sacred trees, sees de thief en de murderer en de least of dese; I hears de boasting en de braggin: Ef you be Jesus, lif up yo tree en walk! I hears de wailin of women en de evenin lamentations"(370).

In another scene, he can see Mary sitting with the little Jesus on her lap and hear the angels singing: "Listen, breddren! I sees de day. Ma'y settin in de do' wid Jesus on her lap, de little Jesus. Like dem chillen dar, de little Jesus. I hears de angels singin de peaceful songs en de glory"(369).

Shegog's visual speech enables the congregation to hear the same sound and see the same image the preacher does. In consequence, Shegog and the congregation can communicate in a visionary world from heart to heart beyond the necessity for words: " Their hearts were speaking to one another in chanting measures beyond the need for words..."(367). In this way, Shegog creates communion with his congregation. As John T. Matthews points out, this sermon "binds together the congregation as a black community"(83). Considering that the previous three sections are narrated in interior, solitary monologue, this sermon, simple but collective and communal, is orated directly to the congregation's hearts and stands in sharp contrast to them. Truly, this sermon, as Bleikasten admires, is "a victory over solitude"(141). Dimmesdale's speech equally directs his audience from isolation to brotherhood, as Michel Small points out: Dimmesdale's eloquence "has the power to break down the isolation of others and lead them to recognize their brotherhood"(115).

3. Voice

Dimmesdale has vocal eloquence which charms the audience:

> The eloquent voice, on which the souls of the listening audience had been borne aloft,

> as one the swelling waves of the sea, at length came to a pause. There was a momentary silence, profound as what should follow the utterance of oracles. Then ensued a murmur and half-hushed tumult; as if the auditors, released from the high spell that had transported them into the region of another's mind, were returning into themselves, with all their awe and wonder still heavy on them.(167)

Like Dimmesdale, Shegog is gifted with attractive sonority of the voice. His voice rings and resounds in the church like music, "with a sad, timbrous quality like an alto horn"(367). Furthermore, he knows how to control the volume of his voice. As Thadious comments, Shegog "understands the human voice as an artistic instrument, which carries personal messages outward to a public audience"(118). He effectively changes his volume from high sonority to low whispering, even to silence. His voice is "too big"(366), but he starts his speech in a "level and cold"(366) voice and he one time addresses the congregation, "Brethren," "in a harsh whisper"(368). Moreover, his voice sometimes "died in sonorous echoes between the walls"(367) and sometimes "it had ceased in fading and cumulate echoes"(367). Shegog changes his volume of voice in a very effective way to grasp the congregation's attention and hearts, and after a while, they gradually come to regard him just a "voice": "the congregation seemed to watch with its own eyes while the voice consumed him, until he was nothing and they were nothing"(367).[6]

4 .Performance

As Ross points out as another technique of his, Shegog's "performance is a *tour de force*"("Powerful Voice"14) and his figure and his behavior on the pulpit are visually attractive to the congregation. He has so small and meager a figure and looks so much like an "aged monkey" that the congregation become curious to listen to "a monkey talking" and "watch him as they would a man on a tight rope"(366). As Darlene Unrue points out, his figure is in the congregation's unconsciousness associated with human primitiveness and gives sympathy: "His monkey body suggests his primitive past, while his black face reflects his African past"(9). After standing still with his arm across the desk, he starts to move dynamically:

> The preacher removed his arm and he began to walk back and forth before the desk, his hands clasped behind him, a meagre figure, hunched over upon itself like that of one long immured in striving with the implacable earth, "I got the recollection and the blood of the Lamb!" He tramped steadily back and forth beneath the twisted paper and the Christmas bell, hunched, his hands clasped behind him. (367)

This performance matches his voice and the congregation thinks of him as "a worn small rock whelmed by the successive waves of his voice"(367) and finally identifies him with suffering Jesus Christ, cries many times in an inspired voice, "Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmm! Jesus! Little Jesus!"(370) Thus, a strange meager traveling preacher impresses himself as an image of Jesus Christ through his gifted speech technique.

Conclusion

The narrative techniques Faulkner shows through Shegog's speech can be ranked, as

Thadious admires, as "Faulkner's technical dexterity, his ability...to fuse structure and idea, action and theme"(119).

Because of its theme and style, the Reverend Shegog's oratorical speech about Christ's crucixication, lies in sharp antithesis to the interior monologues of the loveless and self-centered Compsons in the previous three sections. Their monologues are literally full of words but broken and fragmented, signifying nothing. Like a word-play, they are self-centered and death-directed, producing nothing. This sermon is short and limited, but it moves the congregation in a very powerful way by Shegog's gifted speech technique. Through this Easter sermon, Faulkner attempts to put emphasis on sharing and communion as well as self-sacrifice and love.

Notes

[1] Darlene Unrue also asserts the significance of this sermon: "The Easter Sunday sermon deserves careful analysis, and it is a mistake to regard it only as a sermon that tells of the direct, simple, and primitive path to pure religious feeling. It is much more than that. It is a study in faith and timelessness, and it is incidentally a masterful exemplification of Augustinian theology"(4-5). Cf. Hagopian.

[2] Whereas most critics agree in regarding Dilsey as static, Castille uniquely sees that she "begins to distance herself from the Compsons and to reaffirm her membership in her African-American family," though the sermon "revitalizes her faith in the Christian God"(424).

[3] Stephen Ross tries to categorize the narration in Faulkner's words into five "voices," and this sermon is discussed as "phenomenal voice"(*Inexhaustible Voice* 36-45). "Phenomenal voice," Ross explains, "exists only when explicitly mentioned in the diegetic discourse as sound, act, gesture, or the power of speech irrespective of speech's semantic 'content'"(19).

[4] "And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues..."(Acts 2:3-4).

[5] "All of us hear them speaking in our own native languages"(Acts 2:8).

[6] As Ross comments, "It is common in Faulkner to find both sounds and sights represented in such a way as to be reified, sometimes grotesquely, by figurative language that separates them from their sources"("Powerful Voice" 11). He gives as a good example the sound of the Armstid's wagon in *Light in August*:

> "at last, as though out of some trivial and unimportant region beyond even distance, the sound of it seems to come slow and terrific and without meaning, as though it were a ghost travelling a half mile ahead of its own shape."(6)

Works Cited

Bayer, John G. "Narrative Techniques and the Oral Tradition in *The Scarlet Letter*." *American Literature* 52(1980): 250-263.

Bleikasten, André. *The Ink of Melancholy: Faulkner's Novels from The Sound and the Fury to Light in August*. Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1990.

Castille, Philip Dubuisson. "Dilsey's Easter Conversion in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*." *Studies in the Novel* 24(1992): 423-433.

Davis, Thadious M. *Faulkner's "Negro" : Art and the Southern Context*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1983.

Faulkner, William. *The Sound and the Fury*. 1929. New York: Random,1956.

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter: An Authoritative Text, Essays in Criticism, and Scholarship*. Eds. Seymour Gross et al. New York: Norton, 1988.

Hagopian, John. "Nihilism in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 13(1967): 45-55.

Matthews, John T. *The Sound and the Fury: Faulkner and the Lost Cause*. Boston: Twayne, 1990.

Ross, Stephen M. *Fiction's Inexhaustible Voice: Speech & Writing in Faulkner*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1989.

---. "Rev. Shegog's Powerful Voice." *Faulkner Journal*(1985): 8-16.

Small, Michael. "Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*: Arthur Dimmesdale's Manipulation of Language." *American Imago* 37(1980): 113-123.

Twain, Mark. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. 1855. Berkeley: U of California P, 1985.

Unrue, Darlene Harbour. "Saint Augustine and the Easter Sunday Sermon in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*." *Wascana Review* 19 (1984): 3-16.